

UNTOLD

STORY LEADS FROM MONTANA



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Bridger Bowl Ski Area Celebrates 50th Anniversary

Five Successful Decades without a Single Dime of Profit

Say what? You might think that doesn't sound like a very sustainable business formula, let alone one for a ski area. Don't ski areas need to swim in real estate profits to stay afloat in this day and age? Not at Bridger Bowl they don't.

One of the few non-profit ski areas in the United States, Bridger has operated in the black for many years with the seemingly Pollyanna mission "to provide a fun and affordable skiing experience for residents of the Gallatin Valley." Where's the fiduciary rigor in that warm and fuzzy mission?

Despite this feel good, "Powder to the People" credo, Bridger Bowl has continued to see its credits exceed debits, all the while receiving ongoing national accolades for its high quality terrain and low-key demeanor. In fact, Bridger has operated debt-free over the past ten years, buying three new chairlifts and a mid-mountain chalet with out-of-pocket reserves. What began as an unusual social experiment—to see what happens when a group of purists start a ski area for reasons other than money—has turned into a tale of the



Bob Allen photo. Courtesy Bridger Bowl

Another skier celebrates Bridger's golden anniversary.

"Little Ski Area That Could." With no owners or stockholders in the equation, Bridger has, like a Zen archer, been able to focus on and refine many of the elements that go into making a thriving little ski mountain. In the process they've nailed the bull's eye.

There is no ski in-ski out lodging. The only high speed quads you'll find are on the thighs of skiers and snowboarders prepared and willing to hike to Bridger's famous Ridge. Lift tickets are still affordable

(\$37 per day/adult). Skiers, snowboarders and telemarkers all get along in one big, happy family of snow riders. Looking far and wide from the base area of Bridger there's not a single "trophy" home in sight. Despite the counter-intuitive nature of the place, Bridger Bowl is happy to mark its half-century, golden anniversary this winter. **Writers, editors and other kindred spirit media are invited to come be a part of it.** www.bridgerbowl.com, 406-556-5675.

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Custom Hat Makers Find a Perfect Fit in Montana

The history and culture of Montana are steeped in the Old West. This is, after all, the place where Custer made his infamous last stand; where the world's richest gold strike began at Virginia City; where Wild West figures such as Buffalo Bill and Calamity Jane roamed. So it should come as no surprise that two of the world's best-loved makers of custom cowboy hats also call Montana home: Kickin' Ass Hat Company of Miles City, and Rand's Hats in Billings.

The name for the Kickin' Ass Hat Company, headquartered in Miles City, was partly inspired by the town's world-famous bucking horse sale. Ken Hess, the company's founder, was born and raised on a farm/ranch in eastern Montana, and competed as a rodeo cowboy for many years. And even though he no longer runs his own ranch, Ken says he still is—and will always be—a cowboy at heart.

So why build customized cowboy hats? In his words, "Who knows more about a hat than a cowboy?" Ken builds each hat by hand, offering customers a choice of brim

styles (ranging from "Aussie" to "Snap") and 21 separate crown styles, each customizable with hat bands and other accessories.

Started more than 30 years ago, Rand's Custom Hats in Billings is now world-recognized as the premier destination for cowboys—or cowpokes—who want a custom-fitted cowboy hat. Customers select their base style, size and head shape (long oval, round oval or the "extremely unusual" regular oval), then customize the hat with various colors, fur-felt, brim width and shape, and accessories. Rand's custom hat makers take it from there; each hat is built—start to finish—by one "hatter," from the rolling of the felt to the final horsehair brush.

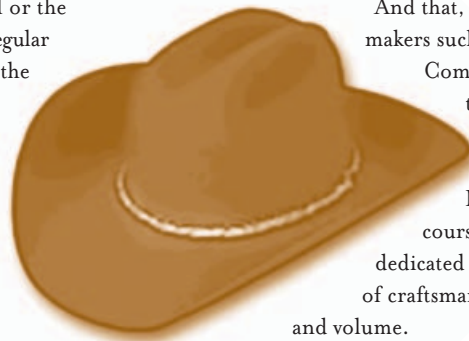
For folks wanting to take advantage of full customizing (and hundreds come to Billings

to do so each year), Rand's also offers a fitting session with a "fomateur," a 19th-century machine built in France that conforms exactly to the head's contours. Ritch Rand, the company's founder and still a hatter himself, says, "A factory can produce a hat by machine in 10 minutes. It takes us almost that long to stamp the customer's name in gold on the sweatband."

And that, too, is why custom hat makers such as Kickin' Ass Hat Company and Rand's thrive in Montana.

They're part of the legendary Old West Montana mystique, of course, but they're also dedicated to a time when pride of craftsmanship trumped speed and volume.

For more information, contact Kickin' Ass Hat Company, 406-234-4723 or <http://www.kickinasshatco.com/>; Rand's Hats, 1-800-346-9815 or <http://www.randhats.com/>



New Ways to Savor the White Stuff

With winter spanning a considerable swath of the calendar in this part of the country, it's not surprising that folks are tapping into new ways to enjoy our extended snow season. Whether as a business or a community effort, you'll find Montanans are passionate about their outdoor recreation.

Take Fred Dietrich, for example, owner of Valhalla Adventure Club, a new backcountry skiing/snowboarding and yurt outfitter in the Stillwater State Forest near Whitefish. Having been laid off from his aluminum worker job, Dietrich decided to reinvent himself as a backcountry skiing entrepreneur. Tooling up, he purchased a \$50,000 Hagglunds snowcat (that can transport 12 people and travel at speeds up to 38 mph), a Bombardier groomer, and a 30 foot diameter Mongolian style yurt. Here his members and guests can warm up over lunch and/or comfortably spend the night, resting for another day of powder skiing on Stryker Ridge. Dietrich has set Valhalla up as a "club" where members pay an initiation fee and then reserve days. Visitors to the area wishing to tap into the Valhalla experience can pay a reduced initiation fee to join the club for a two week stint.

Learn more about Valhalla Adventure Club at: www.valhallaadv.com, 406-862-7541.

Not far to the south, in the spirited community of Bigfork, state and local organizations have collaborated with area Nordic skiers to create Montana's newest cross-country ski area. The Montana Wilderness Organization, Department of State Lands and Glacier Nordic Ski Club pooled their energy to create 9.5 kilometers of groomed track right under the beautiful Jewel Basin. Whether a die-hard diagonal strider, a cardio-animal skate skier, or a family-focused, picnic-intensive group of shufflers, the new Bigfork Nordic Club has created a fresh way for locals and visitors to drink in Glacier Country's crisp, clean air. For more information visit www.bigforknordic.org



Valhalla Adventure Club

Photo courtesy Bigfork Nordic Center

Winter's the Perfect Time for Springs

Yellowstone National Park, which Montana shares with Wyoming, is the world's most active geothermal region: more than 10,000 geysers are within its borders. But that hot water isn't just confined to the park.

In Montana's Gold West Country (north and west of Yellowstone), that same system has created a number of natural hot springs perfect for relaxing getaways. In fact, the area is home to five hot springs that have been developed as vacation destinations.

Potosi Hot Springs Resort in Pony, Montana (south of Three Forks) is known for its intimacy: its full occupancy is generally 8-12 guests, and it only allows children over age 13. As such, it's popular for weddings, honeymoons and other romantic getaways; guests can even do a "Resort Buyout" and have the whole place to themselves for private gatherings. A concierge service can schedule all kinds of activities, such as guided tours, skiing or snowshoeing, fly fishing (the resort has two miles of outstanding private stream fishing), and spa services at the on-site Mountain Flower Spa.

<http://www.potosiresort.com>

Elkhorn Hot Springs, northwest of Dillon, features two outdoor mineral pools, as well as an indoor Grecian Wet Sauna. Each winter, it isn't just the 100+ degree water that draws visitors; there's also a 20km system of cross-country trails laid out on a cloverleaf, stretching from the springs to Comet Mountain and the old Elkhorn Mine. Expert skiers can also try a do-it-yourself mountaineering trip through a nearby ghost town.

<http://www.elkhornhotsprings.com>

Just a bit farther west is Jackson Hot Springs Lodge, rated the number one destination for "Out of the Way Places" by *Poe Travel*. The springs, noted in Lewis & Clark's journals on July 7, 1806 as a "Boiling Spring," are today surrounded by relaxing cabins and lodging, as well as a famed dining room serving meals created with local organic fare. Located on the floor of the Big Hole Valley near the river's headwaters, it's near downhill and cross-country skiing, fishing, and hundreds of other recreational opportunities.

<http://www.jacksonhotsprings.com>



Fun at Fairmont Hot Springs Resort

Boulder Hot Springs mixes history with hot water, starting when the springs were claimed by prospector James E. Riley in 1863. A hotel was built, which went through numerous owners and changes in its next 100 years (in the early 20th century, for instance, it was home to the "Keeley Cure," a treatment for alcohol and drug addiction). It also counted two U.S. presidents among its visitors: Teddy Roosevelt, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1990, the current owners purchased the hot springs and completely refurbished the spa buildings, the dining room, and the east wing of the hotel. They also added conference facilities and now offer three tiled indoor pools, steam rooms, and an outdoor pool. Elkhorn ghost town is nearby, as are Lewis and Clark Caverns, skiing, fishing and panoramic views.

<http://www.boulderhotsprings.com>

Fairmont Hot Springs Resort, a few miles west of Butte, offers two Olympic-sized swimming pools, two mineral soaking pools, and a 350' enclosed waterslide open year-round. The resort, a year-round destination, also includes on-site tennis, a championship 18-hole golf course (including the "mile-high, mile-long" Fifth Hole, considered one of the most challenging in the state), and a massage studio with complete spa services. A popular destination for group meetings and events, the resort offers conference facilities, a café, a dining room, and a lounge. In winter, the resort offers ski packages with nearby Discovery Basin; cross-country and snowmobiling trails wind through the surrounding area.

www.fairmontmontana.com

Filmmakers Find Angels in Montana

Montana's big skies have had a starring role on the big screen in many movies, ranging from well-known classics such as *A River Runs Through It*, *Cattle Queen of Montana*, and *The Horse Whisperer* to independently-minded films such as *Rancho Deluxe*. But perhaps few films shot in Montana have generated as much buzz for their visual richness as *Northfork*, made by Michael and Mark Polish and lensed at various locations around Montana—most notably, giant Fort Peck Dam.

The film, upon its premiere at Sundance 2003, produced immediate acclaim, including high praise from Roger Ebert: "The movie is visionary and elegiac, more a fable than a story, and frame by frame, it looks like a portfolio of spaces so wide, so open, that men must wonder if they have a role beneath such indifferent skies."

As Ebert suggests (and as the Polish brothers themselves have said), much of the film's power comes from the sheer scope and scale of the locations. Massive Fort Peck Dam, featured on the cover of the very first *Life* magazine, provided the central backdrop for the story about a town readying to be flooded for a giant dam. Other large, imaginative sets used include a three-sided church, a split two-story house, a graveyard, and a 93-foot ark built on the plains. The brothers said they fought hard to make the movie in Montana. Although it would have been cheaper to go to Canada, they felt it would have been "a crime" to film such a Montana-centric story anywhere else.

Because so much of the film centers around angels—real or imagined—these settings of Montana's Missouri River Country become rugged versions of heaven: stark and endless, yes, but also beautiful and overpowering. In fact, the Polish brothers have said the movie is a mixture of the contrasts found in their own parents. "Movies are a mirror to who you are," Mark Polish said in one interview. Added Michael: "What I think directly influenced us is having an American father from Montana and a Mexican mother; he's the western and she's the magical realist."

And in the end, perhaps "magical realism" is the most apt description of Missouri River Country's landscape itself: there's certainly something magical about a place so vast and real.

For everything you wanted to know about Montana's film industry, log onto <http://montanafilm.com/>

Fort Peck Dam



Chew-Choo Steams into New Winter Terrain

The Charlie Russell Chew-Choo has been a favorite Montana experience for years: a sumptuous dinner while riding on a restored train, following the route of the Old Milwaukee Railroad Line through scenic views that inspired famed western artist Charles M. Russell. But winter brings perhaps the most magical times to ride the train, thanks to unique, special trips designed for the season. Offered this year are:

- **Brunch with Santa**, December 4: Who better to ride the train with than jolly old Saint Nick? This special 2-1/2-hour trip features a kid-friendly brunch (no yukky stuff), along with chance to hobnob with Santa and score a few extra points in the "nice" column before Christmas.
- **Polar Express**, December 4, 17 and 18: Inspired by the classic "Polar Express" book (and the movie of the same name, starring Tom Hanks, playing on the big screen this holiday season). Families will love this 1-1/2-hour journey, featuring a reading of Chris Van Allsburg's classic book. The trip also features cookies and hot chocolate, elves, carols, and a gift for each child from Santa.
- **New Year's Eve Party Train**, December 31: A full package that lets revelers ring in the



Entertainers aboard the Charlie Russell Chew-Choo.

new year with a ride on the rails. A full package price includes hotel accommodations, roundtrip transportation to the train boarding site, the Charlie Russell train adventure, prime rib dinner, a New Year's Eve party with live music following the train ride, free champagne and noisemakers at midnight, and late check out the following morning (for obvious reasons).

- **Mardi Gras Train**, February 5, 2005: Mardi Gras is cause for celebration, and Mardi Gras aboard the Charlie Russell

Chew-Choo is an even greater cause. This special trip offers the flavors of Bourbon Street and the French Quarter in New Orleans: costumes, contests, entertainers and more put a Cajun kick into winter.

So, winter enthusiasts looking to answer the call of adventure, may just want to answer the call of "All Aboard" in Montana this year.

For more information visit
<http://www.charlierussellchewchoo.com/schedule.html>

Snow Biz in Yellowstone

Overwhelmingly magical and magnificent, Yellowstone National Park is open for winter and Montana boasts two gateways into this wonderland—West Yellowstone and Gardiner. Accessing the park is easy, via snowcoach, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and commercially guided snowmobiling.

For the most current news on snowmobile use, please visit the park's website at www.nps.gov/yell/ or contact West Yellowstone Chamber, 406-646-7701 or <http://www.westyellowstonechamber.com/>



FROM MONTANA

The diversity of events, places and people in Montana is almost as wide as the state itself. We hope to give you a taste of that diversity with this quarterly newsletter. In addition, the following services are offered to editors, writers and producers:

Visual Materials

Color slides and stock video footage are available for editorial use.

Writer/Photographer Referrals

We can put you in contact with many of Montana's most talented and experienced freelance writers and photographers.

Editorial Copy/Calendar of Events

We can provide background information or editorial copy for many subjects. We also maintain a calendar of events for the entire state.

Individual Attention

If you need the latest vacation guide and road map of Montana, a liaison with other government agencies or detailed information to fit a specific story angle, we're here to assist you.

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